

As we end our visit, 'Ad limina Apostolorum', we offer these reflections on our days together in Rome. On Friday 28 September, we were immensely privileged to share conversation with Pope Francis for over two hours. It was a most remarkable and intimate experience.

We asked the Holy Father for a message which we could bring back to our dioceses, to our priests and people. His message was simple: we are to live the gift of our faith with joy. Joy was his great emphasis. He explained that this joy is rooted firmly in our relationship with Jesus. It is a joy of knowing that he is with us; of knowing the presence of the Holy Spirit at work in our lives, drawing and guiding us towards the will of God; a joy of knowing our Heavenly Father is waiting for us, longing to hold us in his embrace of loving mercy. This is the joy of the faith by which we are to live. He added that this joy is the source of lasting peace in our hearts and lives, no matter our circumstances.

As we spoke with Pope Francis we realised, more and more, that he simply radiates this joy and peace. He is indeed gifted with a unique grace of the Holy Spirit of God. Even in this time of turmoil, the Holy Father is so clearly rooted in God and blessed by God. His peace is secure. His life is serene. We know, because he showed us his heart. It is the heart of a loving father. In our turn, we affirmed our deep communion with him and promised him our love, support and prayers. We expressed confidently these sentiments on behalf of all the faithful Catholics of England and Wales.

We spoke with the Holy Father about the difficulties of fulfilling our role as bishops. In turn he reflected on the importance of prayer and preaching in our lives, and of paternal closeness to our priests and people, with care and with firm justice. He spoke of the encouragement he wishes to give to priests today, who can sometimes feel vulnerable in the face of difficult circumstances, in a critical environment. He spoke, movingly, of the wounds inflicted by abuse and neglect, wounds that wreak such harm in the lives of its victims and in the life of the Church. Wherever they are found, these are wounds in the Body of Christ and are painful to touch. He encouraged us, in our pastoral work, never to neglect even the tiny flames of faith that exist in so many communities and people.

We have been given a warm welcome in our visits to all the departments of the Roman Curia. We were asked to speak freely about our endeavours and problems. In the officials of the Holy See we have found a spirit of true cooperation. Everywhere we have been encouraged and given helpful advice. We have seen clear evidence that the life of the

Catholic communities of England and Wales is generally well respected and even admired here in Rome. Our reports of the Eucharistic Congress 'Adoremus' have been well received, as has the strength of our compassionate outreach to those in need.

Indeed, the leaders of Catholic charitable works from England and Wales were present in Rome at this same time, at the instigation of Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) and we were able to spend time and pray together.

In encouraging this work of outreach, Pope Francis urged us always to walk with those engaged in its projects so as to draw them nearer to the Lord who is the source of compassion and mercy. We know so well that it is from our prayer, especially before the Blessed Sacrament, that the mission of each of the baptised truly springs.

In a number of our visits we have been accompanied by two bishops of the Church of England, Bishop Martin Warner and Bishop Christopher Foster. On one occasion we were joined by Sister Frances Orchard CJ of the Conference of Religious in England and Wales. We also visited the Pontifical Commission for Communication, whose Prefect, Dr Paolo Ruffini, is a layman. These are all 'firsts' - examples of openness and change.

Our 'ad limina' visit is now completed. We have celebrated Mass together in the four great Roman basilicas, at the tomb of St Peter and the tomb of St Paul. We have been embraced by the Successor of Peter, Pope Francis. Our pilgrimage has been richly blessed and we are glad to share this sense of the deep encouragement and powerful grace we have received.

Pope Francis commended us to our Blessed Lady, Mary our Mother, reflecting beautifully on her role as the 'untier of knots', a deep devotion in his own life. May she always be at our side.

We pray that God bless and strengthen our Holy Father, Pope Francis. May God guide us in all our ways that we may share the joy of our faith and the ways of peace.